DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 357 UD 034 873

AUTHOR Ferguson, Dianne; Meyer, Gwen
TITLE Kepner Middle School, Denver, CO. Schools on the Move: Stories of Urban Schools Engaged in Inclusive Journeys of Change.
INSTITUTION Education Development Center, Newton, MA. National Inst. for Urban School Improvement.
SPONS AGENCY Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2001-12-00
NOTE 21p.; For other documents from the Schools on the Move series, see ED 455 340 and UD 034 872.
CONTRACT H086C970005-98
AVAILABLE FROM Education Development Center, Inc., 55 Chapel Street, Newton, MA 02458. Tel: 617-969-3440; Fax: 617-964-5448; e-mail: niusi@edc.org. For full text: http://www.edc.org/urban.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; English (Second Language); Hispanic American Students; Mental Health; *Poverty; *School Community Relationship; Special Education; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS Colorado

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experiences of Kepner Middle School in urban Colorado as it participates in the School on the Move initiative to make fundamental changes in its teaching and learning. Kepner is one of 85 schools with which the National Institute for Urban School Improvement is involved in partnerships for change. Kepner is located in a low-income, language minority neighborhood. It is experiencing a challenging transition period, with changes in leadership and staff. With so many English as a Second Language students, Kepner must not only teach English, but also ensure that students continue learning important content and concepts in their native languages. Most of Kepner's special education students are included in general education classes. Kepner's students take elective/exploratory classes, and after-school activities are available through partnerships and other linkages with the community. The culture of work has changed for teachers as the new principal seeks teacher input and participation. Kepner is focusing on mental health issues via a new mental health team. It also offers a program of academic tutoring, with teachers receiving extra pay (via a grant) for participating, and it promotes improved linkages with families and other community members. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 463 357

SCHOOLS ON THE MOVE:

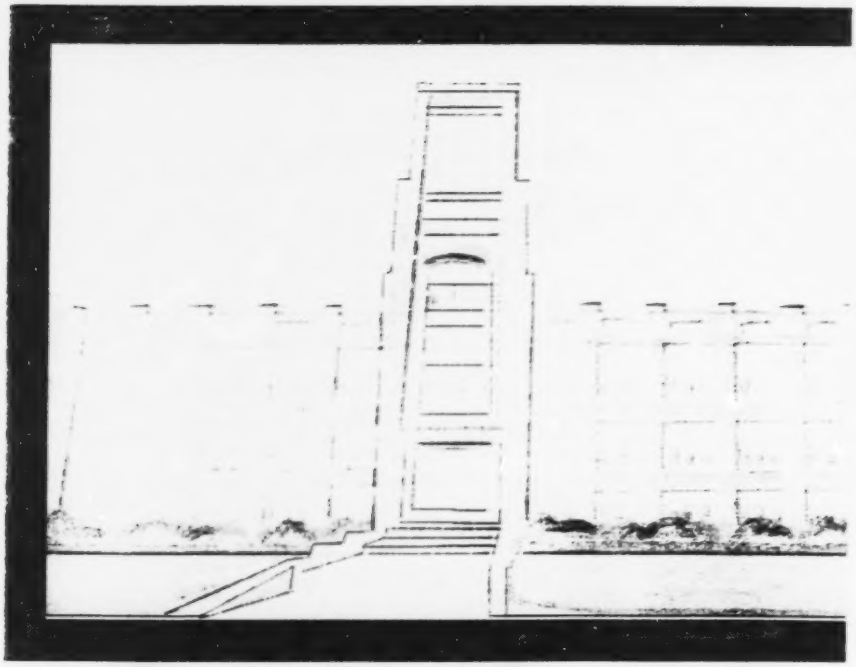
Stories of Urban Schools Engaged in Inclusive Journeys of Change

Kepner Middle School

DENVER, CO

A

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT



IDEAs that Work

Office of Special Education Programs

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Good for Kids, Families & Communities

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UD034873

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
URBAN SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Good for Kids, Families & Communities

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education, funds the National Institute for Urban School Improvement to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation's urban school districts. The National Institute's creation reflects OSEP's long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.

December 2001

SCHOOLS ON THE MOVE:

Stories of Urban Schools Engaged in Inclusive Journeys of Change

These stories depict schools in the midst of exciting changes and renewal. Through the voices of parents, students, teachers, and administrators, these ***Schools on the Move*** are making fundamental and enduring changes in the work of schools and in the results that such changes make in the lives of children and youth. None of these schools' journeys are finished, but the work accomplished and the challenges still to be met offer inspiring lessons about what is possible. We recognize that all schools start from different points, face different challenges, and make decisions based on their local contexts. Our intention, then, is not to provide checklists of change, but rather evidence of effort in the ongoing pursuit of inclusive urban schools. Let us know what you think.

KEPNER MIDDLE SCHOOL

KEPNER MIDDLE SCHOOL "It's a Nice School."

"It's a nice school. It's not run down because it's across the street from the projects. It's a nice school," one of the eighth graders told us. We agreed. We arrived a little late the first day—stuck in traffic—but on the second day, we stood at the juncture of two halls as the front doors opened and 1,100 students streamed into the building. It was an orderly and eager stream. Students chatted, but they were not noisy or boisterous. Occasionally the principal would nod, point, or caution and gum was swallowed, a T-shirt tugged down over a midriff, or a pace slowed, but always with a nod of cheerful compliance.

The Westwood neighborhood of Denver, Colorado, home of Kepner Middle School, is a changing neighborhood. Some of the residents have lived here for many years, but increasingly some are being helped by low-income housing start opportunities to buy homes in nearby, slightly more middle class neighborhoods. About 15 percent of Kepner's students move out during the school year, as their families seek more affordable and stable living situations as well as better jobs. At the same time, this traditionally low-income area is seeing some increase in home ownership, slightly improving the overall economy of the neighborhood. "It is one of the few areas in Denver that's still considered affordable." "Less graffiti in the neighborhood and fewer parent complaints about gangs" mark this gradual, but noticeable change. But as long-time residents move out, new immigrants continue to arrive and struggle to adjust to a new culture, find work, and afford housing. Generally, there are "little pockets of nicer homes" but also parts that are "just very, very, very poor."

Many of the families in the neighborhood don't speak English as a first language, and the range of first languages continues to expand. The neighborhood also has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the State of Colorado. "At least, it did at the last Piton Foundation Study," one teacher told us. "It also has one of the highest drop-out rates. I believe that one of our high schools, West High, had a drop-out rate of 75 percent." This teacher has lived in the Westwood community since 1989 and witnessed its transition from a predominantly Latino neighborhood to one that now includes a growing number of Vietnamese and other

She's one of the best students at Kepner. She has won every single award possible. She says, "The school is so great, Mommy. It is not a bad school. Bad students are not at that school." She is going to be sad when she has to leave. She's a talented girl. And I'm always behind her going straight. I don't know how many things she has to do, but she has to get it perfect in everything. And with her sister, she's hard on her. She gets mad: "No, you can do it better than this. Try again." And she's teaching me. All the teachers are beautiful. They understand, and if she's having a problem, they're there. No matter what, they talk to me and say, "We can fix this." I'm happy about my kids. I have a boy in fifth grade, and he's going to go to this school. I love this school. It's so good. They help kids here.

Asian immigrants. Still, the small group of parents we talked to reported with confidence that "the students learn a lot—to read, write, and speak English." In fact, one father reported, "I think that this school is good because my son should be in another school, but he prefers this one. He says he likes the teachers."

Kepner Middle School at a Glance

The building is big, old, and sprawling. Just next door there is construction underway for a new addition that will reduce the overcrowding as soon as next school year. As we threaded our way repeatedly through corridors and up and down one-way staircases, we noticed how clean, orderly, and well-kept the school appeared despite its age. Classrooms were full, and some were quite crowded, but there seemed to be a pride of place about even the smallest or most crowded rooms. It snowed the second morning we were there. As the students streamed into the building, a custodian positioned himself in the middle of the melee, mopping as fast as the students tracked in the melting snow.

About 85 percent of the students at Kepner Middle School are Latino or Latina, and we heard as much Spanish spoken as we heard English, maybe more. "They are more comfortable with Spanish, understandably," the principal told us. For most, it is their first language as well as the primary language of their homes. In fact, about 50 percent of Kepner students participate in the English Language Acquisition offerings for some part of their career here. Most Kepner students live in a triangle of neighborhoods created by a major diagonal street. A few transfer in from nearby districts because Denver offers parents a choice as long as there is room in a school. However, few of the Asian students who live in the neighborhood find their way to Kepner; the district supports a second-language school with a focus in Asian cultural education for Asian students, and many of them choose to go there instead.

Challenges and Changes

As the Westwood neighborhood changes, so does the school itself. We heard from administrators and teachers alike that Kepner Middle School "is in a transition period." One of the changes has been in leadership at the school. This is Principal Debbie Lanman's first year, although she has worked at Kepner for a dozen years in various roles. Carol Velasquez, one of two assistant principals, has also been at Kepner for 12 years. Both were teachers first, then one became a student advisor, and then the other became one as well. They both became assistant principals, and now their roles have shifted again. This is the first year for the second assistant principal, Bev Chalmers, who talked eagerly of the challenges ahead.

Another significant change is in the teaching staff. Each year, about 12 percent of the teachers at Kepner choose teaching assignments in other schools in the area, or simply decide that Kepner is not the school for them. Many of these teachers "move up" to one of the local high schools. One of the current student advisors said, "I think for the most part people who work here fall on one end of the continuum or the other. They either absolutely love it and cannot envision themselves being anywhere else, or they absolutely loathe it and can't wait to get out the door."

The changes in leadership and staff are challenging. But, Kepner "is a challenging school to work at" for other reasons, too. The school is struggling with a lot of complicated issues. Last year, Kepner received a grade of "F," based on Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) scores. When scores for the bilingual students are removed, the grade is still a "D"—a rating that stings everyone. Several eighth grade students shared their thoughts with us:

> They put us as an "F" school. We're not. They think we are not smart.

> They didn't put the other schools [in the newspaper] that had "F's." Just Kepner. It's because we're Hispanic.

We asked, "Do you think it's a good test that measures what you've learned?"

> No, no, no, one young man responded quickly. Most kids don't understand it 'cause a lot of kids speak Spanish here, and they don't give it in Spanish.

"But what about those of you who speak English?" we asked.

> It asks us stuff that we had two years ago," another student explained. "Like, they're testing you on stuff that you forgot 'cause they taught it in sixth grade, and they're giving you a test on it now.

Teachers are aware of the students' feelings about the public grade. They hear them talking about it, and they worry that the public message students are hearing is, "The teachers aren't doing their jobs—we're an 'F' school because [in] other schools the teachers are better teachers."

But when we asked if teachers were satisfied that the school is working for its students, one group of teachers seemed to agree with their colleague's comment: "We can see them making growth. The test they are judging us on doesn't. It is just that. It doesn't show growth. It just reports where they are at that moment."

We met with a small group of Latino parents, and they were worried, too.

> I'm worried about the program and the CSAP. You know, we are not going to have more money to pay to the teachers. If the school has bad marks, they won't give more money for the school, because the public school money will go to another school that is better than this. The first problem is all the answers have to be in English. The Spanish kids, they understand very well. They do all this homework, they try to do everything okay, and then the test is in English. They can't read that

We asked students, "What are the best parts of this school?"

- ***The sports***
- ***The teachers***
- ***The Technology Resource Room***
- ***The cool library***
- ***Electives—lots of cool electives***
- ***The after-school programs—they keep you out of trouble and off drugs***
- ***Counselors you can talk to even if it's about something at home***
- ***Tutoring after school***
- ***Music classes***
- ***They care about us***
- ***We learn a lot***

But in spite of the fact that Kepner Middle School is "not an easy school to work at," it is also a school that is "getting a move on" in at least three big ways: (1) changing the culture of work, (2) focusing on student achievement, evidence, and practice, and (3) linking more to the community. We will explore each of these along with some of the ongoing issues and tensions that the families, faculty, and students at Kepner will need to face and negotiate along the way. First, we'll provide an overview of the school as it is today.

A School . . .

Kepner Middle School sits on a corner at the intersection of two busy streets. Connected at the corner, the two wings of the three-story, L-shaped building partially frame the playground and sports fields behind. The sports fields and the organized teams are a relatively new addition and have delighted the students. Across from the main entrance, on the first floor, is a large auditorium with a stage and backstage area, its entrances flanked by a collection of well-established plants. On the second floor, the recently renovated library and Technology Resource Center are much spiffier, by contrast. Two gyms and a cavernous cafeteria round out the shared space. The rest is filled with classrooms that house the sixth through eighth grades on the first, second, and third floors, respectively.

With more than 1,000 students, Kepner is well-staffed with 72 certified teachers across the three grades. Somewhere between one-third and one-half of the staff speak both Spanish and English, although not all are truly bilingual. This year, two Spanish-speaking para-educators are available in the office when translation is needed in conversations with parents, students, or teachers. These staff members also support the school resource person or anyone else who needs communication support and assistance. The school has tried hard, however, to make sure the personnel who work closest with students—as many of the teachers as possible, the social worker, and the student counselors—are fluent enough in both Spanish and English to make communication with students and families easy and efficient.

At each grade, groups of teachers work together in core teams that typically focus either on literacy, language arts, and social studies or on math and science. So, in grade 6, there are six core team teachers for language arts/social studies, math/science, and reading. Three of these teachers teach ELA groups, two teach ELA classes that also include students who are identified as having some kind of learning difficulty, and there is an additional language arts core teacher. There is also one additional special education resource teacher who provides a variety of in-class and out-of-class support to both teachers and students.

These patterns of core teams and classes continue at grades 7 and 8. Core subjects are taught in English as well as different types of ELA options, and there are some core classes as well as ELA classes that include students with disabilities. Sixth and seventh grades follow a block schedule, and eighth grade uses 50-minute periods. Generally, teachers work with their core partners to plan, but many also work with other teachers in their subject areas, sometimes across grades, to plan curriculum and design units for instruction.

As one teacher reported,

> When I was a new teacher, I think I looked more to my partner for the behavior, the consistency, and the parent contacts between our subjects. But when it came time for my specific subjects, I reached out to other teachers who also do math and science.

Bilingual and Special Education

With so many students learning English as a second language, Kepner must not only teach the new language, but also make sure that students have the opportunity to continue learning important content and concepts in their native language. The lingo is confusing at first because it's a complicated system. There are really three types of English Language Acquisition (ELA) classes. ELA-Spanish supports students who are just beginning to learn English, while ELA-English provides a balance of learning in both English and Spanish as students begin to improve their English language scores. The ELA-Transition classes are the last step on the support continuum for students learning English as a second language. As the principal explained:

> We have cores [core content classes] in every grade level in which the teachers speak Spanish so we can offer our curriculum in Spanish. And then we also have teachers that transition with the children into English. And then a lot of our cores are English speakers that are trained in teaching second-language learners. Once these children begin to show improvement and can take the test, the oral proficiency test, and can start getting reasonable scores on their tests, we can move them into what we call ELA-Ts, which is a transition core. Then the teachers can fade back.

My daughter, after entering school, didn't speak much English. She understood very little. **Yo dije a la maestra que yo supe escribir, pero no supe hablar.** ***(I told the teacher that I knew how to write but not how to talk.) The teacher passed her on to an English class because she thought she knew English enough to go to an English class. Then my daughter said, "Mommy, I don't understand." But they gave her the*** **oportunidad.** ***They told her she could. She said she couldn't, she didn't want to. So they let her go to the bilingual class. But now she's speaking really well because she was in a class where they spoke both. I think it's really good. Now she's in an English class and doing really well.***

The different types of ELA classes are an effort to ensure that students can strike the balance between learning a new language and continuing to learn the curriculum; however, some parts of the day immerse students in English since "not all of my elective teachers can speak Spanish." While the ELA-Spanish core classes have mostly students who primarily speak Spanish, all the other classes offer a mix of native Spanish- and English-speaking students.

While some parents and students find that the ELA system works, others encourage even more emphasis on English so that they are ready for high school, where parents think there are no bilingual classes. Even the eighth grade students echoed this concern: "They should be making [us] do more English sooner so [we] learn English quicker." The students worry especially about the students that come to sixth grade not speaking English and stay in bilingual classes through the eighth grade. They worry that they won't be successfully "incorporated" into high school. One father reported that in his son's classroom, some of the students don't do their homework because they don't feel like they're going to do it well in English. "They feel insecure. So even when they know the language, when it comes time to work in English, they don't feel like they can, and they don't."

Currently, 125 students at Kepner receive special education services. The majority have learning disability labels; a few have been labeled emotionally disturbed; and there are several with other types of cognitive and sensory disabilities. The "priority and philosophy at Kepner is one of inclusion." Of the 125 students receiving special education, about 90 receive these services in general classes throughout the day. About 20 students are supported in their general education classrooms but also receive some additional time with a special education teacher in a resource setting. Students at each grade level—12 to 15 altogether—attend a special education class for three to four hours a day or more.

In a district where inclusion has not been the norm, the principal smiles when she says, "We're sort of outside the box." In fact, she says, Kepner is one of a few middle schools in DPS to include most of its special education students in general education classes: "The other models [rely on] resource teachers. Sometimes the resource teachers go into the classrooms, and other times the students go out of the classroom. You go to the resource teacher for math, or if it's reading, you go to the resource teacher for reading. It's more of the pull-out or the leave-the-classroom model." At Kepner, though, reports one of the assistant principals, "the kids did not want to go to that resource room . . . they felt that this is not a good place. And I've actually had them cry and say, 'Don't send me to that room,'" reported one of the assistant principals.

Kepner's efforts to become more inclusive began several years earlier when special education teachers were assigned to some of the core classes. In the beginning, they were "just the extra teacher," but that has evolved to the current situation where dual-certified teachers staff many of the core classes—both English and Spanish—and support a variety of students with learning difficulties. But, as with other dimensions of Kepner's transition, there are tensions about the current inclusive practices that need to be resolved and which are a focus of planned initiatives.

The bilingual and dual-certified teachers have tough jobs. Although some of them have extra planning time, a number feel like they are doing double duty—extra work. Everyone wants more support, even when they essentially like the approach. Some teachers also think the current approach is "very difficult for a lot of the students":

> I have a few [for whom] it is very successful—it motivates them to work harder and do well, but there are others [who] are lost. They don't get the one-to-one attention they need. They don't get the small-group instruction they could benefit more from, and [sometimes] you can only modify an assignment so far. It's very difficult.

Class size is a particular challenge for some, even with lots of activities and projects for the special education students and others who need and benefit from lessons that are tailored to their learning. This year the effort is to better understand what is really happening for both students and teachers that leads us to Kepner's emerging initiatives or the new ways that Kepner is "getting a move on," especially those involving data-based decision-making and differentiated instruction.

Community Linkages and Activities

More than once we heard from Kepner students that they liked the "cool" electives/exploratories. Sixth graders have one or two exploratory classes, which are chosen for them. By the time the students reach eighth grade, they choose two electives each semester. Cooking class was a hit, but so were computer and business classes, along with the familiar wood and metal shop. When we visited, students were making picture frames, but not looking forward as much to making the dust pans that the teacher insisted the parents really liked. The students also praised the after-school activities. Every day there are enough different activities that appeal to almost every student. In fact, that is one of the purposes of the variety and number of activities supported by the school: to keep kids interested, involved, and out of trouble. Sports were one of the more popular activities, but the kids also appreciated the "sportsmanship." All the kids in every league and all the sports—everybody here is a good sport." For teachers, this year's emphasis on expanding extracurricular activities was critical. "We are providing tons more activities for these kids to be involved in, and that helps them want to be in school." In fact, one teacher recounted, laughing, "Yesterday, one of our kiddos was gone all day but showed up for practice. You have to work through that, but that's obviously the thing that's a connection for them."

Many of the after-school activities reflect partnerships and other linkages with the community, such as the Mayor's Club Denver that funds a variety of after-school activities. A local university partnership brings special computer programs in technology. Community programs like Colorado Uplift and others sponsored by parks and recreation provide mentoring and opportunity for young students. "Girls are Great," sponsored by Girl Scouts of America and Colorado Uplift, have become "semi-elective" classes that avoid the problem of students being pulled out of other classes for such opportunities. These community linkages extend the capacity of Kepner to provide a variety of activities and opportunities for students.

In- and After-School Activities:

- ***Orchestra: sixth to eighth grades***
- ***Choir: sixth to eighth grades***
- ***Band: seventh to eighth grades***
- ***Trips (New York, Taos, D. C.)***
- ***Cheerleading***
- ***After-school sports:***
  - ***Soccer***
  - ***Volleyball***
  - ***Basketball***
  - ***Football***
  - ***Wrestling***
  - ***Hockey***

What kids would change:

- ***Better lunches***
- ***More passing time***
- ***Longer lunch period***
- ***The bathrooms (smell bad and no privacy)***
- ***Longer breaks***
- ***Longer gym class***
- ***More books***
- ***Don't be so stressful in reading***
- ***Make Spanish-speaking kids do more English, talk to them in English so they learn.***

. . . That's "Getting a Move On"

Last year's school improvement plan included a myriad of activities and initiatives. "There were lots of different things we were working on." There are Accelerated Reading and "balanced literacy" efforts. Six Traits Writing is in progress, and the grade 6 teachers formed into study groups to read and share. Block scheduling continued, but there is some discussion of reorganizing the teaching teams. Including the students with disabilities into core teams has been going well but needs some review and revision. Technology is big, but "what we need to do is continue not only offering it to the children, but also begin a series for teachers on how to actually use technology in instruction." The parent component also needs more attention.

> We had a thousand little directions that we were going in . . . after I worked with my school improvement committee and the CDM [committee . . .] I said to them, "What I want to do is focus more narrowly on the school improvement plan so that when we sit down together we are going to always be talking about the same things."

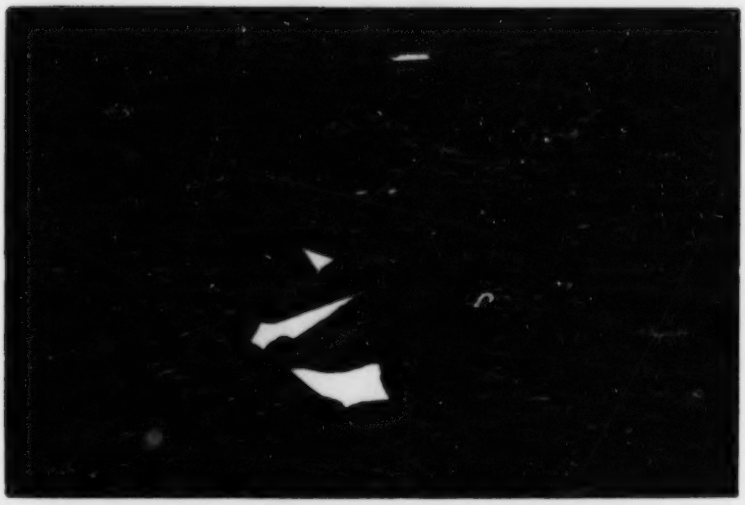
Focus

There are always too many things schools need to attend to, teachers need to do, and students need to experience. All these efforts will continue—every initiative is important to at least some of the faculty and staff—but this year the administration and faculty are also working to create a few directions for focus. We will touch on three.

Changing the Culture of Work

As we noted earlier, Kepner is a school in transition. The previous principal was comfortable making decisions and directing faculty and staff toward the activities that would implement and realize those decisions, but the new principal started the year seeking all kinds of participation from faculty. It's a big change. "Some teachers don't want to," but many others are eager to find a way to participate and contribute. For example, there is the Building Leadership Team (BLT), which formed three years ago as part of Kepner's partnership with the National Institute for Urban School Improvement.

> This year the big piece they [BLT] off was trying to come up with a full school vision . . . A bunch of people last summer went to a conference in Breckenridge and got some really good ideas and some really good preparation, and we've started implementing that process even before school started. Everybody was talking about what we wanted to see our school be in five years . . . It wasn't just a core group of people doing it, it was the whole school. We're still in the process—it is definitely a process—and we are still trying to finalize our vision.



Constructing a common vision and goals was a beginning. The principal wants to create new leadership roles for teachers. The BLT will merge next year with the Standards Resource Team, which focuses on curriculum and teaching to Colorado standards and will be one of two key governance structures (the other is the state-required Collaborative Decision Making Team). According to one of the assistant principals, the vision of the administrators is this:

> I want teachers to start working together. I want them to talk to one another. I want them to analyze student work. I want them to help one another – to share together.

The staff has noticed the change. One teacher admitted that she had a principal now that had "asked my opinion" for the first time in awhile. There are also "more faculty meetings this year ... like once a week." According to the teachers:

> "There seems to be more 'to talk about' At the beginning of the year, some people were talking about how one of the things that your [institute taught] them over the summer was that the schools that have made big changes have a lot of input from the faculty and a lot of "buy-in" from the faculty. So that has been a focus this year--having more faculty input.
>
> [Because] last year at the end of the year, the staff was feeling that we needed something. She [the principal] was listening. We felt real disjointed, real unconnected, and really didn't have a means of communication.

> It's more work really for the faculty. It means more meetings, and it means that maybe you are thinking about things, and you really want to say, "I don't want to think about this. I'm busy doing what I'm doing!" But I think, in the end, you're happy that you collaborated. It does require everybody's input and everybody's work.

This year, then, the emphasis for faculty has been "much more on communication" and the building of a culture of work and sharing that will help Kepner move forward with a new collective vision about the school, the students, and learning. While every teacher has not participated, or even been very optimistic about the effort, those who are enthusiastic hope that there is a critical mass of participation that will sustain the effort in the years to come.

Another way Kepner faculty and staff are trying to change the culture of work—especially for the students—is through a "big emphasis on addressing the mental health issues of our kids," something that many feel wasn't well attended to in the past:

> This year we have a totally new mental health team: a new social worker, a new school psychologist, and a new counselor. The three of us have been working very closely and documenting and really helping to educate staff and kiddos about when interventions might be needed. We aren't really set up to do any kind of ongoing counseling, but we really do work with the community agencies and families and try to get needs met. If you've got a child who is suicidal, who is being abused, who doesn't know where [here or she is] going to live from one week to the next, academics is second, or third, or fourth, or not [a priority] at all.

As part of the mental health effort, the new team is starting a conflict mediation program where the students will become the mediators. The students seemed eager for the new program; as one said, "If you don't want to talk to grown-ups, you can talk to other kids your age." Everyone seems to have the same hope that the conflict mediation program will "start changing the whole school climate so that there will be more of an emphasis on problem-solving and less of an emphasis of solving problems by fighting."

Focusing on Student Achievement, Evidence, and Practice

This year Kepner added a substantial program of academic tutoring with the assistance of a grant. Teachers receive extra pay for participating, and students work on a variety of subjects, including preparing for the CSAP. The student advisors and counselor are working on implementing a peer conflict mediation program, and there has generally been an emphasis this year on students' mental health.

A new emerging focus is, as one teacher put it, "toward data-based decisions—using a kid's test results and what we're seeing to guide our goals." Assistant Principal Velasquez has been

working with a lot of the school's data, trying to organize and present it for teachers to analyze. She's been rank-ordering all the student's GPAs, for example, and comparing them to both CSAP and other scores used within the school. This spring she will disaggregate all the student achievement data by students in various ELA classrooms, those on academic probation, as well as those receiving special education. By comparing progress and achievement data with the various learning environments and teaching practices, the teachers will be able to identify those approaches and practices that are working and those that might need to change. Still, one eighth grade student told us, "We read too much now. They don't even let us go out for lunch recess. We need our vitamin D!"

A lot of our kids are taught to fight. That is the way you solve problems. So we are really countering a culture of violence for a lot of these kids. Hopefully, if they see some of their peers being leaders, solving problems in other ways, they will change too.

Linking More with the Community

We didn't meet with very many parents, but those we spoke with had much to offer. Many of the changes already occurring are improving linkages with families and other community members. Certainly, the new after-school programs are helping to forge new relationships, as is the new mental health focus. Having bilingual staff easily available smoothes communication with families, and the newsletters speak to at least some families. The mix of ideas from parents and school staff, and the shared understanding of the issues facing the school are strong foundations upon which to build new opportunities for school-family collaborations.

A new idea for next year is to have Community Nights one night a month. The idea is to offer ways for parents and other family members to learn more about the curriculum and strategies being used at the school:

> We're going to have, for instance, a meeting for the bilingual parents. We'll have the Accelerated Reader lab open for everyone to use, and maybe a computer night. We'll have a menu of activities going on every month so people can start coming into our community and feel welcome to drop in.

The parents we met with thought it was a great idea. "It's not that we don't have the time," one parent told us, "or that we don't want to help. Sometimes we don't know how."

Helping the parents learn more themselves seemed to be a priority for those we talked with. One additional idea was to have a few teachers available by phone to provide help with homework when parents cannot. Another was to continue and expand the after-school tutoring so that students could get extra assistance in small groups:

> They could stay after school—the teachers know which children need to stay. If they have a question but didn't want to ask it in a class with so many students, when there are fewer after school, they have the opportunity to learn more. Many students won't talk in class because they're afraid their friends will say, "Ah, you don't know

Sometimes I try to help my son, and sometimes, when I don't understand, he has to wait until the next day to ask the teacher. But we try to do our best.

Many parents work, and many didn't learn these things when they were in school. School is different now, and although we try, we can't do it. We can't, simply can't.

> anything." Or, "You don't understand." And it needs to be done in Spanish and in English.

Of course, a different parent pointed out that not all children could stay after school. "The idea is to get more classes in English in the daily schedule."

A School Transitioning

Kepner Middle School seems to be trying to face its challenges squarely, focus on a few key initiatives, and move forward. They seem to have a lot of important tools to help. As one teacher commented:

> I think we have a really amazing staff. Each person on the staff is setting goals and striving to reach them, and the building kind of gets a vibration from it. I think everybody is overwhelmed but really positive.

Another offered:

> I taught on the other side of town for a year, and, you know, you don't make a difference in the lives of the children over there, but you do over here. It's fulfilling.

Whatever happens, Kepner is a *School on the Move* toward achieving more and better things for students and families in the Westwood neighborhood of Denver.

Epilogue

Successful and sustainable change is more likely to happen in schools where everyone shares a common vision and goals. All members contribute their individual talents and enthusiasm to the change efforts of the community. It is clear from this story that Kepner Middle School is such a school. The work of its teachers, administrators, students, families, and community is focused on inclusive practices and finding more effective ways of working together.

Kepner Middle School is one of 85 schools with which the National Institute for Urban School Improvement is involved in partnerships for change. The particular focus of the work in each of the schools is unique and depends on each school's history, goals, and culture. Regardless of the focus, however, each school works within a multi-layered and complex system. We have found it helpful, as we work across schools, to use a map, the Systemic Change Framework, to help us organize our work and to help the schools design, implement, and monitor their own plans and work for change.

The Systemic Change Framework visually represents the varying levels of effort that are combined to effect students' achievement and learning. The four levels of the Framework are interconnected by the lines between them representing the communication systems among families, school, and district personnel that are necessary for ongoing improvement and change. What occurs at the district level affects the school level, which in turn affects student learning. When all levels are in sync, the result is a healthy system that can better support student learning.

The figure here illustrates the parts of the framework that Kepner Middle School faculty and families have been addressing. The highlighted cells graphically represent the work recounted in this story and that was obvious to us during our visit.

For instance, at the **Professional Effort** level, Kepner is focusing on Family Participation in Teaching and Learning, Learning Assessment, Teaching Design and Practices, and Learning Standards. The evidence is their move toward data-based decision-making focusing on student achievement, evidence, and practice, the work to align curriculum and teaching with the state standards, and the support for and implementation of inclusive curriculum and instruction for both students with disabilities and students who are English-language learners. The addition of the peer conflict mediation program, student mental health services, academic tutoring, and the Community Nights for parents and other family members are also evidence of Kepner's focus at this level.

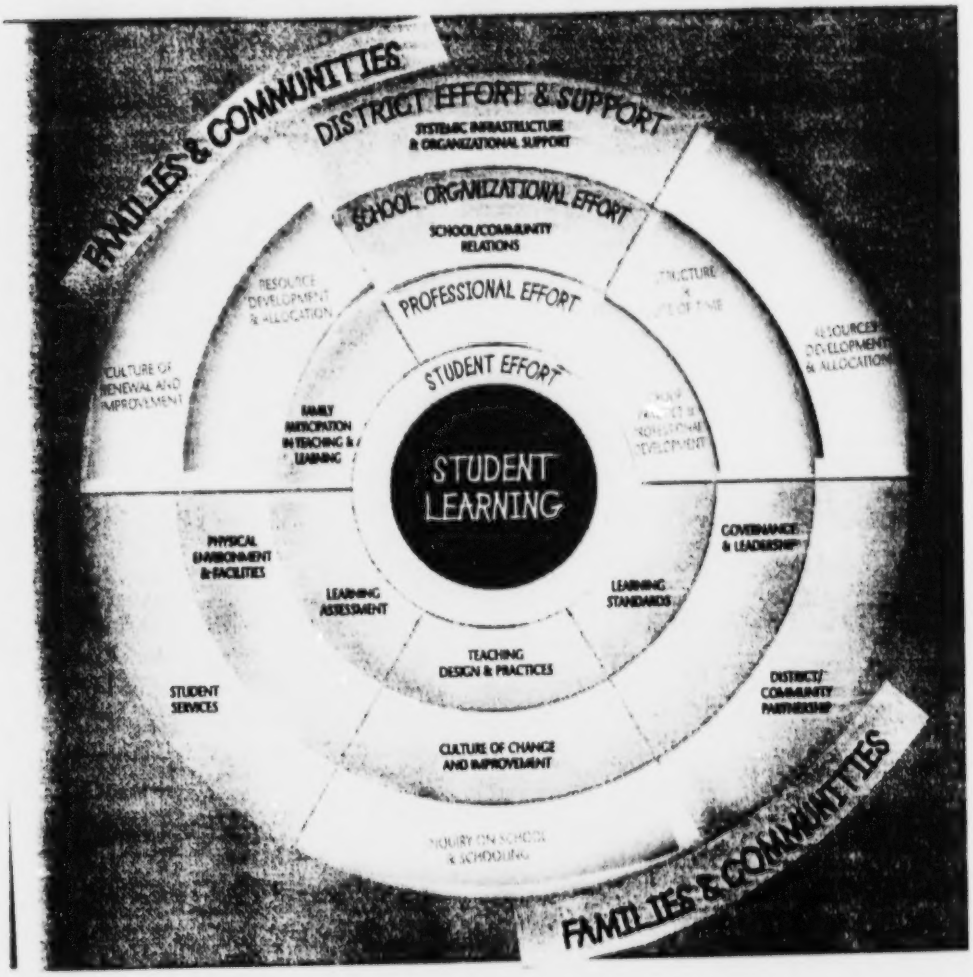
At the **School Organizational Effort** level, School/Community Relations, Physical Environment and Facilities, Culture of Change and Improvement, and Governance and Leadership are areas in which the school community is working to move ahead. Of particular note at this level are the current efforts to increase staff involvement in the governance and leadership at Kepner, the involvement with community organizations to

develop activities and opportunities for students, and continual improvements in the facilities, including the enlargement of the school building and outdoor sports fields and the recently renovated library and Technology Resource Center. Other evidence at this level is an emphasis on communication among staff and between staff, families, and the community. Another important focus at the **School Organizational Effort** level is the creation of a culture of work and sharing that will help Kepner move forward with a new collective vision about the school, the students, and learning.

Finally, at the **District Effort and Support** level, we noticed that the areas of Systemic Infrastructure and Organizational Support, Student Services, and District/Community Partnerships seem to be valued and supported through opportunities for professional development, the bilingual program, inclusive teaching, and the active and creative partnerships between the district and other community organizations, which further the renewal and improvement of the school.

Of course, all of the work at Kepner is guided by the vision of greater achievement and success in learning for each student in the school community.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE FRAMEWORK



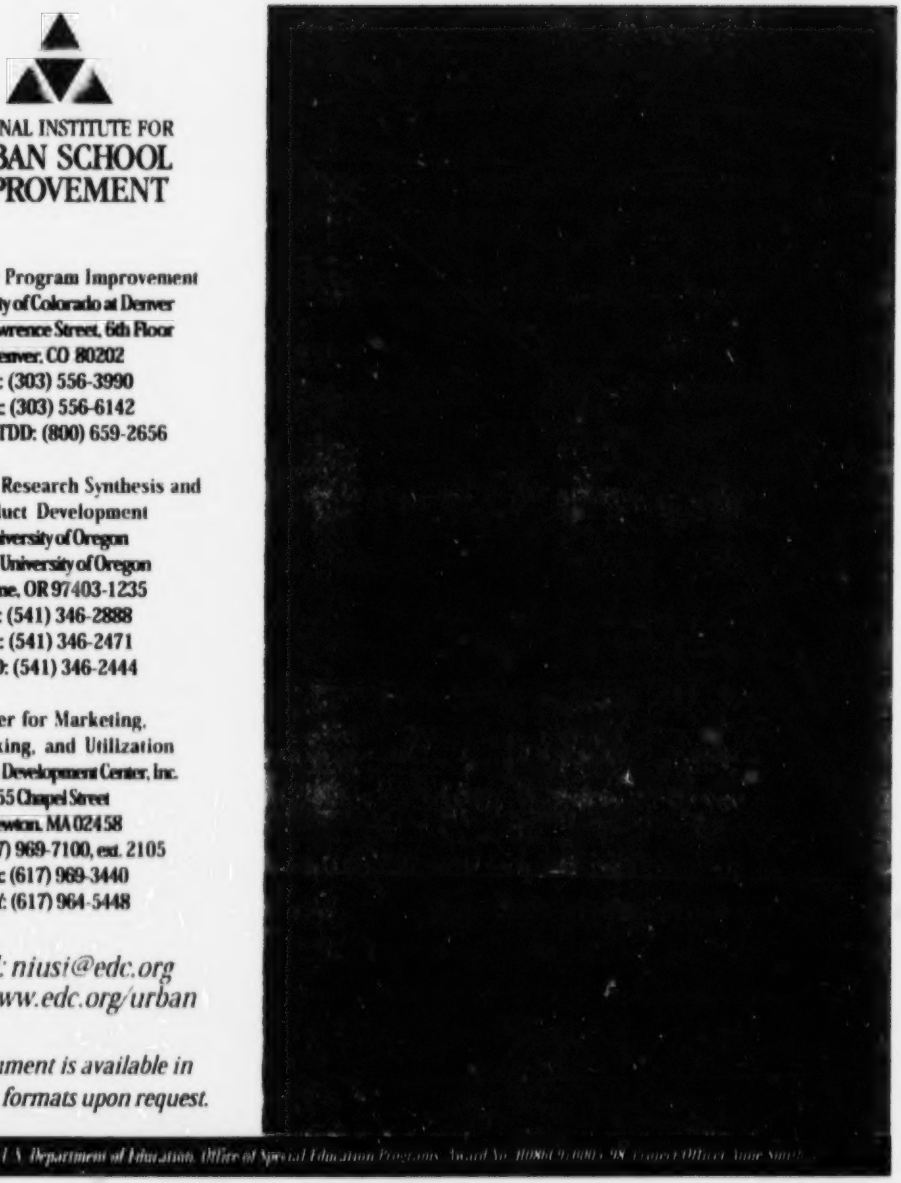
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

About the Authors

DIANNE L. FERGUSON, Ph.D. is the director of the Center for Research Synthesis and Product Development for the National Institute for Urban School Improvement. She also works as a professor and the director of Academic Support and Student Services for the College of Education at the University of Oregon.

GWEN MEYER is a National Institute staff member and works as a senior research assistant with Educational and Community Supports at the University of Oregon.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
URBAN SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT

Center for Program Improvement
University of Colorado at Denver
1380 Lawrence Street, 6th Floor
Denver, CO 80202
Tel: (303) 556-3990
Fax: (303) 556-6142
TTY or TDD: (800) 659-2656

Center for Research Synthesis and
Product Development
University of Oregon
1235 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-1235
Tel: (541) 346-2888
Fax: (541) 346-2471
TDD: (541) 346-2444

Center for Marketing,
Networking, and Utilization
Education Development Center, Inc.
55 Chapel Street
Newton, MA 02458
Tel: (617) 969-7100, ext. 2105
Fax: (617) 969-3440
TTY: (617) 964-5448

Email: niusi@edc.org
http://www.edc.org/urban

This document is available in alternative formats upon request.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Award No. H086[illegible]-98, Project Officer: Jane Smith.